

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Going the Distance

The announcement on February 29th that the Air Force had chosen the Northrop Grumman/EADS team to build the next generation refueling tanker, the KC-45A, was one of the most exciting and triumphant days in recent history for the state of Alabama.

Our day had finally come.

Then last Wednesdayâ€¦

The news from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) that they were sustaining Boeing's protest of the Air Force contract to Northrop Grumman/EADS was a body blow to those of us along America's Gulf Coast.

For over three years, Mobile has been on a journey toward assembling big jet-planes right here in Alabama.

We expected the GAO decision to be the knockout punch in this protracted, 26 month-long, competition between Boeing and Northrop Grumman.

Instead, many of us could have used smelling salts as word of GAO's decision spread.

While the GAO's decision was not the knockout for which we hoped, the Northrop Grumman/EADS team is not out as much as the Boeing contention would like you to believe.

But, what happens next?

The Air Force now has the responsibility of considering the GAO's findings, respond to them as necessary, and even dispute them, if they so choose. The Air Force may even decide to start the process over with a new competition.

While the path forward is uncertain, one thing remains clear – the American warfighter is in desperate need of these tankers. Some of the tankers in our current fleet are celebrating their Golden Anniversary, certainly not the state-of-the-art aircraft we expect our military to take to the enemy.

As history shows, GAO protests can take many unpredictable twists and turns. While each protest is unique, it is instructive to look at recent protests the Air Force has experienced.

One example close to home was a contract for maintenance of the aging KC-135 tanker fleet. Boeing was selected as the winner in September 2007, and Birmingham-based PEMCO immediately protested the award to the GAO.

The GAO upheld the protest, ruling the source selection process had errors. The Air Force corrected those errors, held a new competition, and in March 2008 again awarded the contract to Boeing. Again, PEMCO protested, but this time lost the second protest, and Boeing, the original winner, kept

the contract.

Unfortunately, all protests are not resolved this quickly. The procurement for the new Air Force Combat Search and Rescue Helicopter (called CSAR-X) was awarded to Boeing in November 2006 and subsequently protested.

Almost 20 months later, this issue is still unresolved with a new competition underway and an award expected this fall. So, it is very difficult to predict the outcome of a protest or the timeline for a resolution.

While our team may have been knocked down on Wednesday, we certainly cannot be counted out.

Just look at the facts in our corner – the GAO did not comment on the merits of the KC-30/KC-45 or whether the Air Force picked the best tanker.

And, keep in mind – the Air Force selected the KC-30 over the older, outdated and inferior KC-767 to become our next refueling tanker. We still have the better airplane.

At the end of the day, the Air Force's tanker contract will likely exceed \$100 billion, and it is the tanker the American warfighter will use for the next 50 – 60 years. It is imperative we get this right.

Incredibly, some Boeing supporters have gone so far as to suggest that the Air Force should skip a new competition altogether, and simply award the contract to Boeing.

One of these supporters was even quoted last week as saying, "If it is their No. 1 priority, as they say it is, they should just pick Boeing."

Rest assured, on behalf of the team behind Northrop Grumman and EADS – from the highest elected officials in our state, county and city, to the thousands of interested citizens who signed on-line petitions to "keep our tanker" – we remain solidly committed to bringing the assembly and manufacture of big-jet airplanes to Mobile.

We will go the distance.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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For release the week of Monday, June 23, 2008. For more information please contact Mike Lewis at (202)225-4931.